

RECORD DENSITY

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

Many years ago, when I was just getting started in genealogy, several of us formed a genealogy study group. In our efforts to learn more, we each purchased tapes of lectures at national conferences on the topics we were researching. After we had listened to our tapes, we loaned them to the others in the group. Because of this, I found myself learning about localities and time periods into which my research had not yet taken me. As I listened, I also learned about research strategies from the experts.

In my own lecturing and writing today, I often advise researchers to use the terms “probably,” “possibly,” “likely,” and “maybe” to express their confidence in their proposed conclusion. These are subjective terms. Thus, they are based on the researcher’s experiences. If you haven’t had a lot of experience, it can be difficult to be sure which term you should use. Fortunately for me, a concept I heard so many years ago in a taped lecture by Robert Charles Anderson has helped me immensely.

“Record density” is a concept related to the records you have searched. An analysis of record density can help you determine how confident you are that you have reached a valid conclusion. However, I find it most useful in looking at the flip side of that question—how likely is it that I am wrong?

Record density has several components, which are discussed below, along with the issue of bias:

- The records that were created.
- The records that survive.
- The records that you searched.
- How deeply you searched the records.

WHAT RECORDS WERE CREATED?

Record creation varies significantly in various localities—and in different time periods for the same locality. Certain types of records may not have been created at all for the time period in which you are interested. For example, vital records, particularly birth records, were not recorded for most localities until relatively recent times.

What biases do the records that were created have?

The information in church records varies considerably among denominations. Quaker records and Baptist records, even in the same locality and time period, certainly do not provide the same level of record keeping.

Land taxes have a 100% bias toward persons (usually adult white males) who owned land, whereas personal property or poll tax lists have a much broader coverage and occasionally even list slaves by name.

Deed books have biases that apply to your evaluation of the record density. They are records primarily of persons who owned land—and who bothered to record their deeds. You will have to investigate just how common it was for deeds to be recorded in the time and place of interest.

WHAT RECORDS SURVIVE?

Do an extensive survey to determine what records survive for your time and place. Records maintained by political entities (towns, counties, states, federal government) are more likely to survive because there was an organized record-keeping structure in place.

If there has been a record-loss in public records, identify the bias of the loss. Exactly what records were lost—and at which jurisdictional level? Were they of a type that there may have been an incentive to re-record them at a later date? This might be true, for example, of deeds (to secure title) and modern birth records (for social security and passports).

Nonpublic records such as a church records have an uneven pattern of survival. You may have to do some creative searching to identify if they still exist.

WHAT RECORDS HAVE YOU SEARCHED?

Think about any bias in your search techniques. This is the level at which most genealogical errors occur. You must search all major record groups. Too many researchers base conclusions on too few records. The likelihood that an unsearched record group holds the key to the correct—but very different—solution is very, very high.

If you have searched, for example, only vital, census, and probate records—but not land and court records—then the best you can say about your conclusion is “maybe.” This is true even if they were not searched because they do not survive.

HOW DEEPLY HAVE YOU SEARCHED?

This portion of the record-density concept is the other biggest pitfall for researchers. Sometimes all major record groups are searched, but only to a depth that merely elevates “maybe” to “possibly.”

If the search of “probate records” included only the index to testator’s names in the will index, then the search falls far short. Wills often contain names of individuals whose surname does not match that of the deceased. Additionally, there is substantial bias in wills, in that only a small portion of the population wrote wills.

You also need to investigate intestacies and guardianship records. Again, be aware of bias. Often, no request for an intestate administration was made if there was no property involved. Guardianships would be needed only if there were minor children—and then only if there was property, since the guardianship was for the property, not the child.

If you searched only the grantor-grantee indexes, which have a high level of bias, the danger that you missed an important record is fairly large. Landowners who did not record their deeds might be mentioned as adjoining landowners to those who did file deeds. The names of siblings and widows may appear in quitclaims, which are not necessarily indexed under the name of the deceased. Deeds

often contain the names of nonlandowners as the witnesses.

If you are fortunate, a dedicated genealogist has published thorough abstracts of the deeds for your time and place of interest. Through such publications, I have found a number of important entries that would have been hidden to me otherwise.

If there are no published abstracts, you can do quite a bit to compensate for their absence. Read all deeds for the surname of your ancestor—and for any collateral lines and neighbors that you have identified.

ANALYZING RECORD DENSITY

Having analyzed what records were created, what records survived, what records you have researched, and how

deeply, you are better prepared to evaluate the likelihood that your conclusion is correct. Or, as I said above, the likelihood that your conclusion is incorrect.

This evaluation isn't limited to the times when you can't find a record that states the relationship. I think it is especially important to keep record density in mind when you *have* found such a record. Too many of us stop at that point, thereby searching far too few records. We do not realize that several other persons of the same name were residing in the area, one of whom could be the one named in the record.

We cannot base our evaluation of possibilities solely on the records that we find. We must evaluate those individual records in the broader context of record density.